How Can We Be Better Tomorrow Than We Are Today?
Honest Conversations

Diane E. Beck
Harrison School of Pharmacy, Auburn University, Auburn, Alabama 36849

The highest compact we can make with our fellow is,—
"Let there be truth between us two forever more."
Ralph Waldo Emerson

INTRODUCTION

One year ago, in a sparsely attended Council of Faculties (COF) business meeting, I asked "how can we be better tomorrow than we are today? In this final commentary, I would like to share with members one example of how I think we are better as a COF and how I have personally grown by having the opportunity to serve as the COF Chair and member of the Board of Directors. Both of these examples exemplify an important principle that I would like to convey in this commentary: Honest conversations and feedback are desired by individuals and promote a strong organization. Although I believe we are better today than yesterday, I know we can be better tomorrow. Therefore, I will also share some thoughts about how application of this principle can make us better tomorrow.

How are WE Better as a COF? As I looked out among a room filled with COF members at the 2002 business meeting, I knew we had accomplished something! I believe a major factor in greater participation this year was that members were given an opportunity to have small group discussions where they could provide feedback and share concerns in an open manner. I applaud the excellent work of our committees and task forces for making this happen and am very gracious for their role in more actively engaging our members. Specifically, they enabled an environment of "learning communities" since new knowledge and insights were shared by them and COF members were encouraged to provide candid feedback on committee/task force work. The success of the breakfast discussions at the 2002 Annual meeting also reinforce that our Association members want to have opportunity for sharing expertise, candid conversations, and giving feedback.

How am I Personally Better As a COF Member? The privilege of serving as your Chair has enabled me, at a personal level, to better understand the needs of our members, the attributes of a strong organization, how a compact promotes a positive organizational culture, and how candid and honest conversations during board meetings builds a cohesive group of colleagues, and enables that group to be effective. I have personally grown by serving as your Council of Faculties chair and board member and want to thank you for giving me this opportunity to both serve the COF and learn in the process.

During the last two years, I have learned the value of honest conversations and feedback at the organizational level and want to particularly share these insights with other members who, like me, have had very little formal training in organizational behavior and leadership. I believe sharing of my new insights will enable future Council leaders who follow my footsteps to have a "jump start" in guiding the Council and help all members build a strong culture within their pharmacy school.

So, let me share a few things that I have learned during the last few years about honest conversations and feedback. During my first year on the Board, I learned how the Association staff has established a compact and how this has enabled them to achieve excellence and be innovative as a group. (See Appendix I) A compact is an agreement or covenant that facilitates better communication between two or more individuals(1). In an organization, a compact can facilitate communication of the shared values and a code of conduct that underlies the organization's mission. (How often have you heard someone ask what your pharmacy school mission statement really means?)

Following a board retreat where the attributes of a strong organization were discussed, the Board of Directors realized the value of a compact and established one similar to that developed by the AACP Staff. Each of these compacts communicates the expectations of its members. For example, each communicates members will have constructive discussions about improvement and proactively give and receive feedback. In both instances, I believe the compact is viewed as something more than words on a piece of paper. Rather, each compact has become a set of core values that each individual has inculcated and the words convey a code of conduct when working as a group. (A compact will only be successful if it is adopted as a core value by all and adhered to daily.) Although I have also gained a better understanding about the value of establishing a compact when a workgroup is formed, and the value of honest conversations and feedback, I also know I have so much more to learn in order to be better tomorrow. Will Durant once said, "Our knowledge is a receding mirage in an expanding desert of ignorance.” In other words, every time we learn something new we realize how much more we need to learn to be better tomorrow! I look forward to applying some of my new insights into my personal daily practice as an academican, past COF chair, third-year Board member, and member of the Association. Organizations are an integral part of our daily lives. Whether as a member of the Association, the Council of Faculties, a faculty member of a pharmacy school or even a committee, we are part of a group that is united for some purpose and have individual responsibilities or roles within this group. Frances Hesselbein, President and CEO of the Drucker Foundation and former chief executive of the Girl Scouts of the USA, points out the importance of a strong "culture" within an organization(2). She defines a culture as the "set of values, practices, and traditions that define who we are as a group.” Hesselbein further explains that "Strong” organizations or groups demonstrate competence, commitment, and innovation. Organizations which promote candid discussions among members enable an atmosphere where there is trust and motivation to excel. I therefore, encourage all of us at the organizational and individual school levels to build a culture that promotes honest conversations and feedback. The remaining sections of this commentary outline some examples of how we can do this and I encourage you to discuss such approaches with your colleagues.
How Can We Promote Honest Conversations and Feedback at the Association Level? At an organizational level, we have a staff that has adopted a compact and learned how to build a strong workgroup that encourages honest conversations. I encourage them to share with Association members how this was accomplished so that perhaps we can use some of the same approaches in other areas of the Association. I encourage AACP leaders to continue listening to our members and developing programming that gives members an opportunity to have honest conversations in both small and large group settings so that we can learn from each other. I also encourage members to provide candid feedback to Board Members and the Staff about how we can better meet your needs. Your Board Members and Staff are there to serve you!

How Can We Promote Honest Conversations and Feedback at the Individual Pharmacy School Level? I propose that honest conversations and feedback need to be an integral attribute of the pharmacy school culture and it needs to be evident at the faculty-faculty, faculty-student, and faculty-administrator levels. The following sections outline a few examples of how this can be accomplished.

Although all pharmacy schools have mission statements, many faculty members, students, and alumni struggle with identifying the core values and code of conduct that underlie the real meaning of their statement. The COF currently has a Task Force that is developing a one-page instrument to help faculty members within a pharmacy school have an honest dialogue about the school's culture. The purpose of this instrument is to facilitate honest and candid discussions among faculty members about questions such as, "who are we" and "what do we really value?" Hopefully, this instrument will be finalized in the coming year and help all faculty at pharmacy schools better understand their culture and what they need to do to achieve a higher level of performance.

To facilitate honest conversations at a faculty-faculty level, there must be an atmosphere of trust and a use of strategies that will facilitate communication. Development of a compact such as that established by the AACP staff and the AACP Board of Directors is one strategy. I want to emphasize however, that the faculty can not stop when the words are drafted in writing. Everyone must adopt these as values and apply them during their daily academic responsibilities. This strategy could promote better relationships among faculty and facilitate the effectiveness of faculty members as they work in teams and groups.

Honest conversations need to also occur at the faculty-faculty level about assessment. Although assessment is now an integral requirement for accreditation, not all faculty members have accepted the concept(3). Experts note that in order for assessment to truly be successful and Therefore, enhance student learning it must become an integral part of a pharmacy school's culture(4). Realizing this, Banta and Palomba have developed a set of "Core Principles for Assessment" that a faculty can adopt as a compact so that faculty members have more trust in assessment activities and how the results may impact them(5). I have had experience in discussing these core principles with faculty members and these experiences suggest adoption of these core principles is only effective when an appropriate amount of time is devoted to first discuss what each principle really means. Without honest discussions about what the principles mean, the document is only words on a piece of paper.

We also need honest conversations and trust at the faculty-student level. Today's students often enter pharmacy school with a set of expectations that may be different than that of the faculty. Jordan Cohen, President of the Association of American Medical Colleges has recognized this need in medical schools and has recommended that medical educators develop a compact that explicitly communicates what faculty should expect of students and what students should expect of faculty(6). An appendix of his article includes a compact that outlines guiding principles, commitments of faculty, and commitments of students and residents. The guiding principles of this compact emphasize duty to "care," integrity, and respect. I believe pharmacy schools would benefit by giving similar attention to the commitments expected by both faculty and students and therefore, I encourage you to read this article. The expectations of faculty and students are part of the "educational climate" and there is evidence in the literature that an effective climate contributes to student achievement and positive satisfaction(7-9). When measuring achievement of learning outcomes, pharmacy educators are encouraged to assess the impact of the educational climate since it may help explain why the learning outcomes were or were not achieved.

Initiating honest conversations that involve communicating inappropriate behaviors, disclosing errors, and providing negative feedback are not easy. In Ende's classic article about feedback in clinical medical education, he notes that individuals are often reluctant to give honest feedback because it might provoke anger or defensiveness by the recipient(10). Often it takes "moral courage" to speak up, disclose the truth, and make ethical decisions. Kidder et al, notes that individuals are more likely to speak with moral courage when it is a part of the shared values within a culture(11). Due to changes in our health care system and the potential harm that can result when medical errors are not disclosed, pharmacy students must develop the moral courage to disclose such errors(1). We are more likely to accomplish this if we, as a faculty, role model the use of honest conversations and moral courage.

Feedback requires honest conversations and moral courage. Faculty members want effective feedback from administrators so they can confirm their self-assessments and identify new strategies to be better tomorrow. Likewise, students want effective feedback from faculty members so they can improve and grow. Hewitt(12), Ende(7), and others(13,14) have written some excellent documents summarizing how to convey feedback in an effective manner. The AACP Staff Compact in the Appendix communicates some of the essential elements in providing effective feedback.

During the last year, evidence-based education, a 2020 vision, honest conversations, and moral courage are some of the approaches I have proposed for how we can be better tomorrow than we are today. We can be better tomorrow than we are today if we take the initiative. Of all these approaches, what do you think is of greatest importance and therefore, willing to first tackle to assure we are better tomorrow than we are today?

*Last, but by no means least, courage—moral courage, the courage of one's convictions, the courage to see things through. The world is in a constant conspiracy against the brave. It's the age-old struggle—the roar of the crowd on one side and the voice of your conscience on the other.*

Douglas MacArthur

**Acknowledgements.** I want to thank the AACP Staff and all Board Members during the last three years for helping me learn more about the Association, identify how to better serve our members, and be a member of a collegial group who is committed to serving pharmacy educators.

**References**

5. Palomba, C.A. and Banta, T.W., "Developing definitions, goals, and plans," in *Assessment Essentials: Planning, Implementing, and...*


APPENDIX. AACP STAFF COMPACT

STIMULATE INNOVATIVE THINKING
We encourage the broadest range of thinking reflected in our willingness to entertain any idea on its own merits regardless of source and past experience.

To stimulate a broad range of innovative thinking we are resolved to:

• Positively reinforce the presentation of new ideas and alternative solutions.
• Thoroughly explore all new ideas and alternative solutions.
• Accept that all ideas and alternative solutions will not be used.

Seek Collaboration in our Work
We each have an individual responsibility to enhance the work of the group and the group has a responsibility to enhance the work of the individual.

To provide the highest level of effectiveness among staff we are resolved to:

• Maximize the potential, individually or through partnering, of all staff members.
• Show our willingness to sacrifice our individual needs for the sake of the group's needs.
• Try to help our colleagues achieve their major goals and objectives.

Individually Support Each Other
We recognize the ways that we as individuals can impact and support the group.

To provide the level of support we are resolved to:

• Encourage constructive discussion of behavior for the purposes of improvement.
• Provide the necessary support to implement agreed upon decisions.
• Strive to understand each other's needs and perspectives.
• Seek help in confronting problems.

Communicate Feedback
We give feedback to and receive feedback from those with whom we interact on work-related behavior to assist the group in achieving its potential.

To provide the most effective, constructive use of feedback we are resolved to:

• Respect the receiver in our delivery.
• Be timely, specific, and to the point.
• Direct comments toward what is changeable.
• Focus on the job, the performance, and not on personal issues.
• Consider the feedback received and how it might be used to improve performance and relationships.

RESOLVE DISAGREEMENTS
We view conflict as a mechanism to understand others' perspectives and helping us to improve our performance and relationships.

To address conflicts and disagreements we are resolved to:

• Communicate our disagreements to the source or to those involved, either directly or by requesting assistance from our colleagues.
• We take on conflict over ideas and different perspectives with the goal of improvement.

American Journal of Pharmaceutical Education Vol. 66, Fall 2002